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Empowering Our Ministry: Surviving in the World

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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Of all the possible television to watch, I most especially enjoy the nature channels. I admire the ways in which camera crews and producers and editors tell the story of a pride of lions or follow the seasons in a particular locale. This kind of programming also leads to watching the shows that describe those animals that are approaching endangered status, and the steps that biologists are taking to reduce the possibility that the ecosystem will lose forever a species.

In our way of thinking, we take endangered animals and raise them in safe but captive environments. Eventually, we decide in many cases to release these animals back into their native habitat. We hope for the best but, by and large, this project is not going well. Especially the animals born in captivity but also those taken from the wild and then re-introduced into the wild, often have trouble finding food, fleeing predators and selecting mates.

hese animals need to learn complex behaviors if they are to forage successfully and avoid ending up at someone else's dinner. Without exposure to older, more experienced members of their own species, young captive-bred animals are at a major disadvantage. They are like children raised without culture or tradition. They don't know how to be wild in the wild.

I have read that as many as 80% of these animals released into the wild are eaten by other animals. A year or so ago a lynx was released into a canyon in the Southern Rockies. When the cage was opened, it simply lay there, probably waiting for the next terrifing episode to unfold. Eventually, after much coaxing, the wretched, disoriented animal wandered slowly away into his new, totally unfamiliar home.

The question I am asking is, how do you give endangered animals the skills they need to survive in the world? It's not a much different question from the one many Christians ask when they step out of the church door and into the world. How are we going to survive out there? Paul has the answer.

We must exercise the spiritual gifts we have been given. It's only in the literal exercise of our Spirit-given spiritual gifts that we have a chance of changing the culture. I have spoken to you before about spiritual gifts, these supernaturally supercharged talents and abilities given to the Christian, by which the body of Christ, the church, is built up, and empowered through these gifts to be an effective witness in the world.

What I haven't said so boldly before I say to you now: Use 'em or lose 'em.

As Presbyterians, we have been taught a great deal about the fruit of the Spirit, even if you don't recognize the teaching by that name. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

These are the characteristics of a transformed life. These are the emblems of character, of the person who submits the self to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Come to church and learn and be exhorted to be a better follower of Christ - this is what Presbyterians have emphasizes for generations.

What we have not had much teaching on are the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit are leadership, service, administration, discernment, faith, tongues, healing, giving, mercy, knowledge, wisdom, exhortation, teaching, shepherding, prophecy, intercession, music, craftsmanship, interpretation of tongues, and evangelism. These are the building blocks of power ministry, of getting the transforming power of the Gospel from its place hidden within the church, out into the world where the Gospel is needed the most. When understood and used, the gifts of the Spirit have the effect of building up the body of Christ so that it is healthy. And a healthy body of Christ, a healthy congregation, is always bringing glory to Christ by connecting with a hurting and lost world.

Today, our public zoos are becoming the Noah's Arks for endangered species but, as I have said, those who know this isn't good enough, those who know that wild animals belong in the wild, don't really have a good, proven way to get the wild back into the wild. But, to carry the metaphor to us, we do know how to get the Gospel out of the church and into the wild of the world. We just don't do it very much.

The church, like a zoo, is a sanctuary, a safe place to learn and grow in God and the Spirit. But perhaps unlike a zoo, we have plenty of fellow 'animals' who have recently been in the wild, and who can instruct us. But we must get some solid, biblical understanding of these supernaturally supercharged talents and abilities which God has graciously given us, and then begin to use these gifts in our teaching and discipling ministries. Otherwise, it's like asking a sculptor to teach a student, but tying one hand behind his back - here, mold this clay on the wheel, but keep it even and balanced using only one hand. I suppose it's possible … but it's a stupid waste of resources.

If we can begin to welcome into our hearts these spiritual gifts as graciously given, practical benefits, we will see how they can overlay our current efforts, yet provide better direction and supernatural power. We will see how we can place people with particular gifts into particular ministries that need those gifts, with the result that fewer and fewer people will burn out or become depressed because their ministry efforts are not being successful. We will see how people with self-acknowledged gifts will become confident to begin new ministries when put together with others who share the same gifting.

In one Midwestern congregation, a young man within the church saw a need - single mothers who were having frequent transportation problems. This young man found others who, like him, knew how to repair cars, and they found within the church support for the exercise of their supernaturally supercharged gifts. Now, people in the congregation regularly donate older vehicles to the men of the 'Car Ministry,' who repair them and give them to the needy in and outside the church, serving both to build up the body of Christ and to effectively witness to Jesus in the world.

The spiritual gifts we Presbyterians have not talked about for generations are like this. They are always to be used for the common good. Martin Luther King once said that 'evil is not driven out but crowded out … through the expulsive power of something good.' Spiritual gifts are the energy cells to take our transformed, fruit of the Spirit maturing selves, out from the church, into the world.

You have nothing to fear from spiritual gifts. They are given by the same Lord who builds and transforms us into mature disciples. They are part and parcel of the instruction God gives us so that we will be given the instincts to survive out there in the wild, and to tame the cultural wilderness for Jesus Christ. But these gifts of which I speak are not inbred - they must be taught and they must be practiced. Whether it's sewing or woodworking or golf, you get better with practice and with spending time with people who have been doing this for a longer time than you.

If we want to be effective in the wild, we must be willing to be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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